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## **Paul Ami Bonifas: The Necessity of Unity**

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# Paul-Ami Bonifas: The Necessity of Unity

By Barbara E. Messerli Bolliger

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**P**aul-Ami Bonifas (1893–1967) is an artist “among the best of our time, as he belongs to that noble class of explorers who make its glory” (fig. 2).<sup>1</sup> If such a judgment comes from Amédée Ozenfant (1886–1966), with whom Le Corbusier (1887–1965) struck up a friendship after his arrival in Paris, and with whom he founded *L'Esprit Nouveau* in 1920, it is surely worth consideration.

*L'Esprit Nouveau*, an “international illustrated revue of contemporary activity” as its subtitle explains, continued until 1925. In its infancy, from 1921 to 1922, Bonifas assumed the duties of general secretary. But, even though he was directly involved in this widespread activity of Le Corbusier, one looks in vain for his name in books and articles on Le Corbusier. It is futile to speculate on the quality of their relationship. In the beginning there must have been mutual affection, but it cooled over the years. Bonifas’s friendship with Amédée Ozenfant lasted, however. Ozenfant not only wrote an article on Bonifas,<sup>2</sup> as well as the introduction to the most important book yet published about him,<sup>3</sup> but also mediated Bonifas’s appointment—after his emigration to the United States—to the chair of ceramics in the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Washington in Seattle.

The problem of the relationship between Le Corbusier and Bonifas can be focused at a theoretical level. Le Corbusier’s point of view was clear. “Modern decorative art is not decorated,”<sup>4</sup> he wrote (fig. 3). This tenet had already been advanced by others. Adolf Loos treated the question in an article in *L'Esprit Nouveau* in 1920 under the very eloquent title “Ornement et crime” (Ornament and crime). This was the start of a controversy where on one side there were the defenders of ornament in decorative art, and on the other side, to which Bonifas later belonged, artists who preferred forms without decoration. In Switzerland this controversy reached its culmination in 1927 at the Museum of Applied Arts in Winterthur, when the exhibition *Form ohne*

1. Edmond Beaujon, *L'art du potier Paul A. Bonifas*, introduction by Amédée Ozenfant (Editions de la Baconnière: Neuchâtel, 1961), 5.
2. Amédée Ozenfant, “Paul-Ami Bonifas,” *Art et Décoration. Revue mensuelle d'art moderne*, vol. 66 (Paris, April 1937): 109–112.
3. Beaujon, *L'art du potier*, 5–9.
4. Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, translation and introduction by James I. Dunnnett (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), XXIII.

Fig. 2. Paul-Ami Bonifas in his studio at Ferney-Voltaire, ca. 1938. Photograph courtesy of Valentin Bonifas.



Ornament (Form without ornament) took place (fig. 4).<sup>5</sup> Le Corbusier certainly influenced Bonifas's ceramics, especially those pieces created in the second half of the 1920s and the early 1930s. But he downplayed certain aspects of decorative art. "One cannot assign a place to decorative art...alongside the folk cultures and the work of art. Decorative art lies far from it; to attempt to define its position is to reveal clearly its purpose and quite different orientation: that of providing decoration, of promoting decorum."<sup>6</sup>

At this point the difference between the two men emerges. Bonifas, in the eyes of Le Corbusier, is somehow degraded to a promoter of decorum. Both as architect and painter, Le Corbusier saw himself following a nobler course: "The work of art [is] the 'living double' of a being, whether still present, or departed, or unknown; that faithful mirror of an individual passion; that moment of profound discourse; that confession of a like mind, those open and eloquent words spoken in the intimacy of the soul; perhaps this *Sermon on the Mount*."<sup>7</sup>

But Bonifas's reality—his daily lived reality—was an "individual passion" for ceramics, a "profound discourse" with clay. He took part fully in the movement of *L'esprit nouveau*. He was one of the rare ceramists who had no secrets about his production, who made ceramics both on the potter's wheel and with forms. And he had well-defined ideas on his art, which he expounded in several articles.

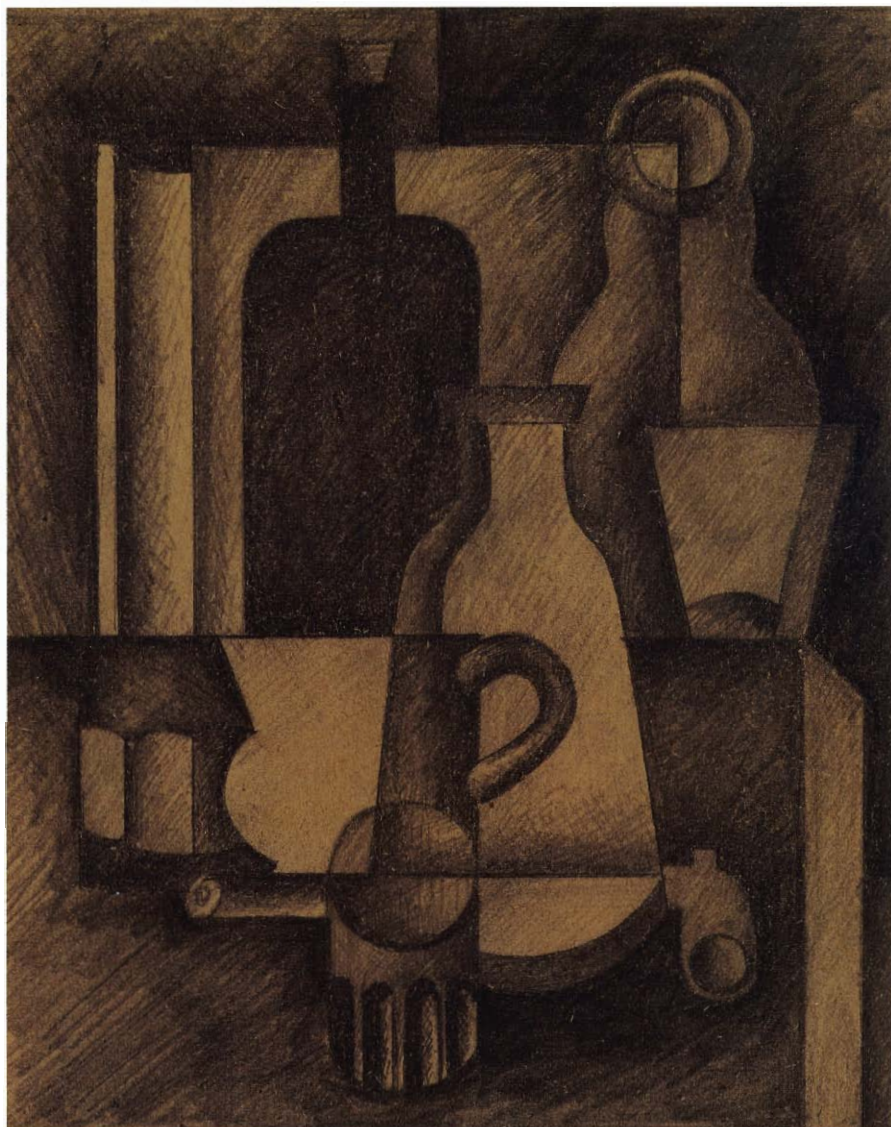
Le Corbusier and Bonifas must have parted ways in 1925, the year of the famous Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs, the year in which a new style was christened art deco. Le Corbusier participated in this exhibition

5. Daniela Ball-Spiess, "Un art appliqué: La céramique," *La Suisse romande entre les deux guerres*, exhibition catalogue (Lausanne, 1986), 132. This article includes a bibliography and a biography of Paul-Ami Bonifas.

6. Le Corbusier, *Decorative Art*, 118, 120.

7. *Ibid.*, 118.

Fig. 3. Le Corbusier, *Nature morte à la cruche, verre et carafe au livre* (Still life with jug, glass, carafe, and book), pencil on paper, signed Jeanneret, 26 x 16.5 cm, ca. 1921. Photograph courtesy of Arteba Gallery, Zurich. © 1993 ARS, New York/SPADEM, Paris.



with “a pavilion of *L'Esprit Nouveau* which would indissolubly link the equipment of the home (furniture) to architecture (the space inhabited, the dwelling), and to town-planning (the conditions of life of a society).”<sup>8</sup> This was his attempt to join the three dimensions of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* to a fourth dimension, the spiritual. The exhibition of 1925, during which Le Corbusier had to fight against “a mass of difficulties,”<sup>9</sup> saw his personal battle for reinforced concrete construction against “the plaster palaces”<sup>10</sup> that dominated the exhibition on the banks of the Seine, from Concorde to the Alma area. It was also a fight against the official taste of the exhibition, which chose to hide Le Corbusier’s and Pierre Jeanneret’s pavilion behind a green-painted seven-meters-high palisade.

8. Ibid., XIV.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., XV.





**Fig. 4. Poster of the exhibition Form ohne Ornament, 1927. Photograph Winterthur Museum.**

Bonifas took part in the 1925 exhibition as a member of the international jury for the ceramic section. He, as well as Le Corbusier, had gone far beyond the provincial spirit that characterized the official Swiss delegation for decorative arts at the Paris exhibition.<sup>11</sup>

Bonifas was born in Geneva on 11 November 1893. He was not very eloquent about his early years: "Studied in Europe; classical education, music, art; also the techniques of graphic arts, jewelry, and enamel. Subsequently studied ceramics and branches of chemistry related to ceramics and mineralogy."<sup>12</sup> In fact, he learned the profession of jewelry engraving in his father's workshop. During the same period—from 1910 to 1913—he also attended the School of Fine Arts in Geneva and became very much interested in enamel. In 1913, the inaugural year of the Swiss School for Ceramics in Chavannes-Renens, Bonifas entered the school and began his ceramic education. The director was Maurice Savreux, who was also Bonifas's teacher. In 1914, at the beginning of the First World War, the school in Chavannes-Renens had to be closed when the staff was mobilized. Savreux returned to France. The students left without finishing their studies and began to work on their own.<sup>13</sup> From 1915 to 1919 Bonifas had a studio in Versoix near Geneva. When it was destroyed by fire in 1919, not only the studio burned. All his works and notes were consumed by this elemental power—which at its best can turn clay into works of art, but at its worst can totally destroy.

After opening his studio in Versoix, Bonifas took part in the activities of L'Œuvre, the association for art and industry in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. It was the same society of which Le Corbusier—then under his given name, Charles-Edouard Jeanneret—was a founding member in 1913. In the German-speaking part of Switzerland this society was called Werkbund, also founded in 1913 but some months earlier. Both branches were organized primarily in local groups and through these groups contributed to the national exhibitions of the Swiss Werkbund.

Bonifas's name is mentioned in publications as early as 1917. In that year he participated in the decorative arts section of the Swiss National Exhibition in Zurich and also had his first solo exhibition at the Athénée in Geneva. In January an article on Bonifas by H. Naef appeared in the revue *Pages d'Art*, published in Geneva.<sup>14</sup> The author gives his personal impressions of a visit to Bonifas's Versoix studio. The end of the article recounts a kind of interview in which Bonifas expresses his opinions on ceramics.

At Versoix Bonifas produced ceramics of two types. The first was studio ceramics, formed on the potter's wheel and therefore unique (fig. 5). He signed this work with his own name (BSV for Bonifas Versoix). The second was work in series for which Bonifas formed the vessel in plaster and then made its mold. The forming of these pieces, which were marked with the label "Floréor," was left to his assistants. The studio ceramics included earthenware and stoneware, the work in series only stoneware. The earthenware was fired twice, the stoneware only once. All the known pieces are decorated, either directly in the form with a relief or later with painting.

**Fig. 5. Paul-Ami Bonifas, vase, stoneware, thrown on the wheel, h. 21.5 cm, Versoix-Geneva, 1915–1919. Photograph from Edmond Beaujon, *L'art du potier Paul-Ami Bonifas* (Editions de la Baconnière: Neuchâtel, 1961).**

11. J. Gantner, "Die Schweizer Abteilung," *Das Werk* (July 1925): 202–213.

12. Beaujon, *L'art du potier*, 10.

13. Ball-Spiess, "Un art appliqué," 131.

14. *Pages d'Art. Revue Mensuelle Suisse Illustrée. Beaux-arts-littérature-musique* (January 1917): 487–494.







**Fig. 6. Paul-Ami Bonifas, two vases and a plate, stoneware, Versoix-Geneva, 1916. The vase on the right, h. 11 cm, was formed in a mold. The vase on the left, h. 14 cm, and the plate, d. 19 cm, were thrown on the wheel. Photograph from Edmond Beaujon, *L'art du potier Paul A. Bonifas* (Editions de la Baconnière: Neuchâtel, 1961).**

Bonifas's attitude toward form was quite decisive. Form follows function or, in his own words, "Each object has to be provided with the most suitable form for its use."<sup>15</sup> Asked about the variety of ceramic forms, he replied, "There are seven or eight standard forms which cannot be surpassed."<sup>16</sup> For Bonifas it was not at all embarrassing to create forms close to those of ancient cultures or even to those of contemporary potters. He found the explanation for such similitudes in the material itself, the potter's clay. "If a vase born out of my hands coincides in its general lines with an antique form, it is an encouragement, even a proof, that the esthetic principle discovered thirty centuries ago comes true for me and through me."<sup>17</sup>

The decoration of ceramics was, at this time, one of his main concerns (fig. 6). It seems the problem of decoration concerned him more than that of form. In *Pages d'Art* Naef concludes, "Mr. Bonifas has not always had an aptitude for decorating his ceramics.... Ornament in ceramics must have the function of accentuating either the form or the basic color. Mr. Bonifas's latest works prove to me that we share this opinion."<sup>18</sup>

To review the works of the Versoix period is to recognize that Bonifas's artistic ambition was to match form and decoration. The results of this effort are at times almost classical.

After the loss of his studio in Versoix, Bonifas moved to Paris. In 1920 he became technical director for Achille Bloch & Sons, manufacturers of porcelain and reproductions of ancient ceramics. Bonifas held this position for only one year, after which he became general secretary at *L'Esprit Nouveau*. These activities—to judge from the short time he was involved—did not correspond to his true ambitions. Nevertheless he says about the time in Paris, "Those two-and-a-half years were full of events and experience."<sup>19</sup>

15. Ibid., 492.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 493.

18. Ibid., 494.

19. Beaujon, *L'art du potier*, 19.

**Fig. 7. Paul-Ami Bonifas, black ceramic vase, body and handles thrown on the wheel, h. 30 cm, Ferney-Voltaire, 1928. Photograph from Edmond Beaujon, *L'art du potier Paul A. Bonifas* (Editions de la Baconnière: Neuchâtel, 1961).**

In 1922 Bonifas established his second studio at Ferney-Voltaire, France, close to the French-Swiss border. "Studio" is not quite the right term, as he bought the ceramic workshop of L. Berguer & Cie., successeur de J. Johannel. It was, as he put it, a renewal of "thinking pots" in the circumstances of a traditional potter's workshop. He continued the company's business, with their employees. As Bonifas tells us, these workers were not only skillful but also made all sorts of efforts and initiatives to give the products new interest.<sup>20</sup>

Bonifas worked for about four years on "common pottery" or earthenware. The question may well be raised why he was willing to work under such circumstances. Was it financial difficulty that kept him from opening a studio of his own? Was it the influence of Le Corbusier, who put works of art and folk cultures on the same level but decorative art far from either? Since Bonifas had previously produced decorative art at Versoix, was he now trying—by producing popular pottery—to equal the rank of works of art, according to the dictum of Le Corbusier?

Speculations are useless, especially when Bonifas's subsequent artistic evolutions are considered. These—as he relates to us—happened by accident. "It was the result of an error and a mishap, both combined, that studies were made with new elements. A dark brown clay and a black glaze, iridescent and

with a gloss like satin, that endured the same firing as the 'common pottery,' were better than any other material for subsequent research on forms and procedures."<sup>21</sup> Discovering the new materials

is described by Bonifas as a matter of mere chance. But from the first article written about him, and through the

ceramics he created, Bonifas appears as a highly concerned, conscious, and intentional artist. To credit the creation of his black ceramics to chance alone would be to underestimate, even to hold in contempt, his potter's skills. With the new material at his disposal, he produced forms never before seen. With these new ceramics, all questions about decoration became moot.

Bonifas's unique concern is form (fig. 7).



20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.





**Fig. 8. Paul-Ami Bonifas,**  
vases in black ceramic, bowl  
in faïence, Ferney-Voltaire,  
ca. 1930. Vase on the left,  
h. 80 cm. Photograph courtesy  
of Valentin Bonifas.

It is in his black ceramics that Bonifas finally reaches the level of *purisme* described by Amédée Ozenfant in 1916 and 1917 in his revue *L'Elan*. Ozenfant wrote a book with Le Corbusier, *Après le cubisme* (After cubism), that expressed the idea of purism being an art in solidarity with the industrial, mechanical, and scientific spirit. Le Corbusier's desire was "an aesthetic of purity, of exactitude, of expressive relationships setting in motion the mathematical mechanisms of our spirit..."<sup>22</sup> It is not too difficult then to qualify Bonifas's black ceramics as works of a purist artist. The clay is described by him as being of a dark brown that, together with the black glaze, gives the pieces a unity of materials rarely reached before. The color of the clay and glaze demands strict forms. With these new materials, even the effects of light are under the control of the ceramist (figs. 1, 7, 8, and 9).

To create a ceramic form can be—according to Bonifas—compared with any other artistic activity. "A [ceramic] form is therefore worthy of being studied with the same care as a sculpture, even if it retains the modesty of an everyday object."<sup>23</sup> This idea represents Bonifas's scientific spirit. But what about his mechanical one? He was not an artist who could be imagined using big machines in his studio. To reach the results he wanted, he invented a production

22. Le Corbusier, *Decorative Art*, XXIV.

23. Beaujon, *L'art du potier*, 23.

Fig. 9. Paul-Ami Bonifas, black ceramic vase, h. 23 cm, Ferney-Voltaire, 1931. The body was thrown on the wheel, the handles were formed in a mold. Photograph from Edmond Beaujon, *L'art du potier Paul A. Bonifas* (Editions de la Baconnière: Neuchâtel, 1961).



method that can be described as semi-mechanical. On the potter's wheel he placed a mold that gave the vessel its exterior form. For the interior he used a steel tool that could be adjusted with great precision. The advantage of this method was to separate the interior form from the exterior one, a procedure not possible with the potter's traditional throwing of clay on the wheel.

The third component of the purist definition of art is the industrial spirit. It has already been mentioned that Bonifas produced two types of ceramics at Versoix: studio ceramics and a production in series, the pieces formed with molds. In Ferney-Voltaire he refined the system by adding an intermediate type. They were produced in molds but in a limited number, each piece marked with "Bonifas." These molds were destroyed after use, whereas the molds of the larger series, signed 'BOAS' (for Bonifas), were kept in the workshop. No detail of the form was left to chance. Bonifas explains the form of a plate as follows: "The border of the plate is much thicker at its rim than where it is fixed at the useful bowl of the plate, in this way giving it the form of a sort of circular handle or knob...."<sup>24</sup> With this special form Bonifas got a greater grip for his plate, which had a diameter of about fifty centimeters (fig. 10). By his production method of mold and calibrated steel tool, he achieved a piece that, "in spite of its large size, endured drying and firing without becoming deformed or cracked."<sup>25</sup> These professional accomplishments of Bonifas, who combined a rarely found, highly developed craftsmanship with an artistic conception, were shaped by his contact with the outstanding figures of his time.

24. Ibid., 21.

25. Ibid.

Ozenfant writes about these capacities: "Today Bonifas is capable of conceiving in his spirit...pure, strong forms—of a strength which has the force of perfection—and which he can realize exactly as he conceives them."<sup>26</sup>

Around 1930 Bonifas began to create a type of ceramics that were the complement of the black ones. They are called *faïences blanches* (white ceramics), though the glaze has a creamy tone and, in some variations, can also be colored. Bonifas produced in faïence—the body in earthenware, the glaze crackled—quite large vases that were destined to stand in entrance halls, or vestibules, of private houses. Their task was to add warmth to a new architecture that "often appears distanced, abstract, and cold."<sup>27</sup> This description of modern architecture must not be taken in a negative way, however, as Bonifas welcomed not only its new forms but also its new materials.

In Ferney-Voltaire Bonifas worked with his first wife, Alice Bonifas-Sordet. He had met her at the School of Fine Arts in Geneva where both attended courses in drawing and painting. They continued to draw, even when they were fully occupied with ceramics. Sordet even continued to paint, a natural gift inherited from her mother, Caroline Sordet-Boissonnas, a famous Geneva portraitist. They first worked together at Versoix, marrying in 1917. They had three children—Valentin (who became a professor at the University of Lausanne), Anne-Marie, and Claire.

For all their diligent effort, Bonifas and his wife did not achieve the financial success they deserved. By 1934 he was bankrupt. In 1936 he began again in Ferney-Voltaire, this time without a whole workshop at his disposal, but only his wife and a thrower and a female painter. In 1940 the German occupation forced him to leave France and return to Geneva. His son also went back to Switzerland, to serve in the army; his wife and two daughters stayed in Ferney-Voltaire and continued to run the workshop.

From 1940 to 1945 Bonifas was employed at the Ethnographical Museum of Geneva. In 1943 he and his wife divorced, she continuing the workshop in Ferney-Voltaire on her own until 1973. In 1945 Bonifas married his second wife, Simone Philippe, with whom he had two children, Marion and John. In that same year he emigrated to the United States where he taught ceramics at the University of Washington in Seattle, a task that did not leave much time for his own creations. After retiring from the university in 1959, he again devoted himself to ceramics until his death in 1967 at Oak Harbor, Whidbey Island, Washington.

The life of Paul-Ami Bonifas can be described as that of an outstandingly gifted and intelligent man who dedicated his entire strength and will to ceramics. He was discerning enough to know that "nothing is gratis, nothing is just given to you."<sup>28</sup> But he also believed that this material, which had fascinated mankind for thousands of years, would not lose its fascination for future generations. □

26. Ozenfant, "Paul-Ami Bonifas," 112.

27. Beaujon, *L'art du potier*, 41.

28. Paul Bonifas, "L'art du potier," *Charpentier* (January–February 1940): 17.





Fig. 10. Paul-Ami Bonifas, plate, faïence, d. ca. 50 cm, Ferney-Voltaire, 1932–1935. Exterior formed in a mold, interior formed by a calibrated steel tool. Photograph from Edmond Beaujon, *L'art du potier Paul A. Bonifas* (Editions de la Baconnière: Neuchâtel, 1961).